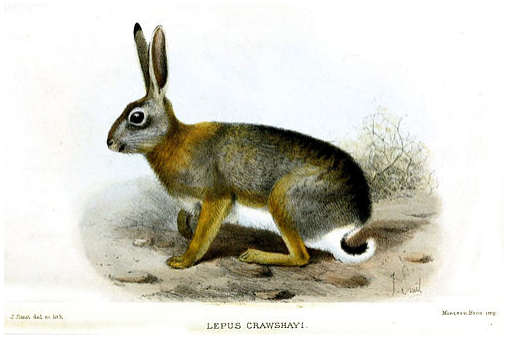
Br'er Rabbit

Br'er Rabbit (/ˈbrɛər/ *BRAIR*; an abbreviation of *Brother Rabbit*, also spelled **Brer Rabbit**) is a central figure in an oral tradition passed down by African-Americans of the Southern United States and African descendants in the Caribbean, notably Afro-Bahamians and Turks and Caicos Islanders. He is a trickster who succeeds by his wits rather than by brawn, provoking authority figures and bending social mores as he sees fit. Popular adaptations of the character, originally recorded by Joel Chandler Harris in the 19th century, include Walt Disney Productions' *Song of the South* in 1946.

African origins

Br'er Rabbit's dream, from *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*, 1881

The Br'er Rabbit stories can be traced back to trickster figures in Africa, particularly the hare that figures prominently in the storytelling traditions in West, Central, and Southern Africa.[4] Among the Temne people in Sierra Leone, they tell children stories of a talking rabbit.[5] Other regions of Africa also tell children stories of talking rabbits and other animals.[6] These tales continue to be part of the traditional folklore of numerous peoples throughout those regions. In the Akan traditions of West Africa, the trickster is usually the spider Anansi, though the plots in his tales are often identical with those of stories of Br'er Rabbit. However, Anansi does encounter a tricky rabbit called "Adanko" (Asante-Twi to mean "Hare") in some stories. The Jamaican character with the same name "Brer Rabbit" is an adaptation of the Ananse stories of the Akan people.[7][8]



The African savanna hare (*Lepus microtis*) found in many regions on the African continent: the original Br'er Rabbit.

Some scholars have suggested that in his American incarnation, Br'er Rabbit represented the enslaved Africans who used their wits to overcome adversity and to exact revenge on their adversaries, the white slave owners.[9] Though not always successful, the efforts of Br'er Rabbit made him a folk hero.

Several elements in the Brer Rabbit Tar Baby story (e.g., rabbit needing to be taught a lesson, punching and head butting the rabbit, the stuck rabbit being swung around and around) are reminiscent of those found in a Zimbabwe-Botswana folktale.[10]

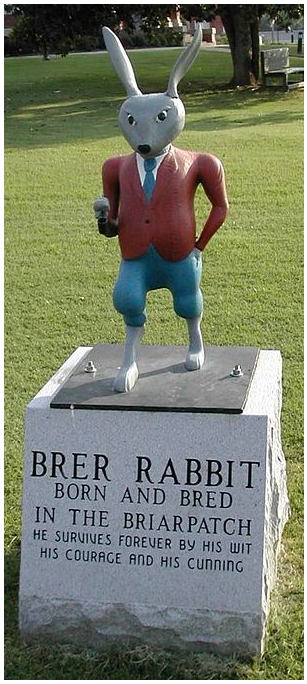
Folklorists in the late 19th century first documented evidence that the American versions of the stories originated among enslaved West Africans based on connections between Br'er Rabbit and *Leuk*, a rabbit trickster in Senegalese folklore.[11][12]

American adaptations

Stories of Br'er Rabbit were written down by Robert Roosevelt, an uncle of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt wrote in his autobiography about his aunt from Georgia

Br'er Rabbit	
Br'er Rabbit and the Tar-Baby, drawing by E. W. Kemble from "The Tar-Baby", by Joel Chandler Harris, 1904	
First appearance	19th century *Song of the South* (1946)
Created by	Traditional, Robert Roosevelt, Joel Chandler Harris, Alcée Fortier
Voiced by	Johnny Lee (*Song of the South* and *Mickey Mouse's Birthday Party*[1]) James Baskett (The Laughing Place sequence in *Song of the South*[2]) Art Carney (*Walt Disney's Song Parade from Disneyland*[3]) Dallas McKennon (record releases) Jess Harnell (1989–present)

that "she knew all the 'Br'er Rabbit' stories, and I was brought up on them. One of my uncles, Robert Roosevelt, was much struck with them, and took them down from her dictation, publishing them in *Harper's*, where they fell flat. This was a good many years before a genius arose who, in 'Uncle Remus', made the stories immortal."



Eatonton, Georgia's statue of Br'er Rabbit

	Nick Cannon (2006 adaptation)
In-universe information	
Alias	Riley, Compair Lapin
Species	Rabbit
Gender	Male
Occupation	Trickster

Some stories were also adapted by Joel Chandler Harris (1845–1908) for white audiences in the late 19th century. Harris invented Uncle Remus, an ex-slave narrator, as a storyteller and published many such stories that had been passed down by oral tradition. He claimed his stories were "the first graphic pictures of genuine negro life in the South."[13] Harris also attributed the birth name *Riley* to Br'er Rabbit. Harris heard these tales in Georgia. Very similar versions of the same stories were recorded independently at the same time by the folklorist Alcée Fortier in southern Louisiana, where the Rabbit character was known as *Compair Lapin* in Creole. It has been argued that Beatrix Potter based her Peter Rabbit tales on Brer Rabbit.[14]

Indigenous American parallels

In a detailed study of the sources of Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus" stories, Florence Baer identified 140 stories with African origins, 27 stories with European origins, and 5 stories with Native

American origins.[15]

Although Joel Chandler Harris collected materials for his famous series of books featuring the character Br'er Rabbit in the 1870s, the Br'er Rabbit cycle had been recorded earlier among the Cherokees: The "tar baby" story was printed in an 1845 edition of the *Cherokee Advocate*, the same year Joel Chandler Harris was born.[16]

Algonquin Nations in Eastern North America similarly depict rabbits and hares as cunning and witty. Many stories of rabbits' or hares' wit include connections to the trickster, shapeshifter sometimes referred to as Nanabozho.

In "That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community" by Jace Weaver, the origins of Br'er Rabbit and other literature are discussed. Although the Cherokee had lived in isolation from Europeans in the remote past, a substantial amount of interaction was to occur among North American tribes, Europeans, and those from the enslaved population during the 18th and 19th centuries. It is impossible to ascertain whether the Cherokee story independently predated the African American story.

In a Cherokee tale about the briar patch, "the fox and the wolf throw the trickster rabbit into a thicket from which the rabbit quickly escapes."[17] There was a "melding of the Cherokee rabbit-trickster ... into the culture of African slaves."[18]

Joel Chandler Harris

A.B. Frost illustration of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby from the 1895 version of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*

There are nine books by Joel Chandler Harris that contain Brer Rabbit stories:

- *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881), containing 25 Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation* (1883), containing 52 Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Daddy Jake, the Runaway: And Short Stories Told After Dark* (1889), containing four Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Uncle Remus and His Friends: Old Plantation Stories, Songs, and Ballads with Sketches of Negro Character* (1892), containing 11 Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (1905), containing 13 Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit* (1907), containing four Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Uncle Remus and the Little Boy* (1910), containing five Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Uncle Remus Returns* (1918), containing six Brer Rabbit stories.
- *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* (1948), containing three Brer Rabbit stories.

Enid Blyton

There are eight books by Enid Blyton that are collections of stories featuring Brer Rabbit and friends, most of which appeared in various magazines in the late 1930s.

- *Heyo, Brer Rabbit!* (1938)
- *The Further Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (1943)
- *My Enid Blyton Brer Rabbit Book* (1948)
- *Enid Blyton's Brer Rabbit Book* (1963)
- *Enid Blyton's Brer Rabbit Again* (1963)
- *Enid Blyton's Brer Rabbit's a Rascal* (1965)
- *Enid Blyton's Brer Rabbit Holiday Adventures* (1974)
- *Enid Blyton's Brer Rabbit Funtime Adventures* (1974)

In popular culture

Early comics

- In 1902, artist Jean Mohr adapted the *Uncle Remus* stories into a two-page comic story titled *Ole Br'er Rabbit* for *The North American*.[19]
- The McClure Newspaper Syndicate released a *Br'er Rabbit* Sunday strip drawn by J.M. Condé from June 24 to October 7, 1906.[20]

Disney version

Br'er Rabbit in Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). Disney's version of the character is more stylized and cartoony than the illustrations of Br'er Rabbit in Harris' books.[21]

- The 1946 Disney film *Song of the South* is a frame story based on three Br'er Rabbit stories, "Br'er Rabbit Earns a Dollar a Minute", "The Laughing Place" and "The Tar Baby". The character of Br'er Rabbit was voiced by Johnny Lee in the film, and was portrayed as more of a "lovable trickster" than previous tales.[21] Disney comics starring that version of Br'er Rabbit have been produced since 1946.[22]
- Splash Mountain, a thrill ride at Tokyo Disneyland and formerly at Disneyland and Magic Kingdom, is based on the above 1946 film's animated segments featuring Br'er Rabbit. Br'er Rabbit also appeared at the Walt Disney Parks and Resorts for meet-and-greets, parades and shows. He also appears on the television series *House of Mouse* (2001–2003) and in the 2001 direct-to-video *Mickey's Magical Christmas: Snowed in at the House of Mouse*, as well as in the 2011 video game *Kinect: Disneyland Adventures*. Starting with the Disneyland version of Splash Mountain in 1989, Jess Harnell has provided the voice of Br'er Rabbit in all of his modern Disney appearances.
- An *Uncle Remus and His Tales of Br'er Rabbit* newspaper strip ran from October 14, 1946, through December 31, 1972.[23]

Other adaptations and references

- On April 21, 1972, astronaut John Young became the ninth person to step onto the Moon, and in his first words he stated, "I'm sure glad they got ol' Brer Rabbit, here, back in the briar patch where he belongs."[24]
- In 1975, the stories were retold for an adult audience in the cult animation film *Coonskin*, directed by Ralph Bakshi.
- In 1984, American composer Van Dyke Parks produced a children's album, *Jump!*, based on the Br'er Rabbit tales.
- A direct-to-video adaptation from Emerald City Productions was released in 1989 and re-released various times in the 1990s, distributed by Family Home Entertainment (F.H.E.).
- Rabbit Ears Productions produced two Br'er Rabbit tales (*Brer Rabbit and the Wonderful Tar Baby* and *Brer Rabbit and Boss Lion*)
- 1998's *Star Trek: Insurrection* saw the *Starship Enterprise* enter a region of space called the *Briar Patch*. At some point during a battle with the Son'a, Commander Riker states that it is "time to use the Briar Patch the way Br'er Rabbit did".
- A direct-to-video film based on the stories, *The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*, was released in 2006. Nick Cannon provides his voice for the character.[25]
- There is a brand of molasses produced by B&G Foods named after the character.[26]

- In Sam Kieth's *The Maxx*, the character Mr. Gone refers to Maxx as "Br'er Lappin" and indeed Maxx is worried if he removes his mask he will find he has a rabbit's head beneath it.
- In the 1982 film *Savannah Smiles*, Savannah tells a story of Brer rabbit to her captors Bootsie and Alvie.
- In the Tristan Strong series, Br'er Rabbit appears as a recurring character. He is depicted as a cynical but well-meaning mentor god.

See also

- Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear
- Gullah storytelling
- List of Uncle Remus characters

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External links

- The Wrens Nest 100 Years of Telling Tales (http://www.wrensnest.org/)
- Full text of Joel Chandler Harris (http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/h#a868) from Project Gutenberg
- Brer Rabbit Stories at AmericanFolklore.net (http://www.americanfolklore.net/brer-rabbit.html)
- Theodore Roosevelt autobiography on Brer Rabbit and his Uncle (http://www.bartleby.com/55/1.html)

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- Archived audio recording of an educational ArtsSmarts elementary school recording of "Brother Rabbit and Tar Baby" (https://archive.org/details/BrotherRabbitAndTarBaby)